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ON PAGE A 4

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Journalists Urge Senate Unit to Curtail CIA Censorship of Former Employees

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The Senate Intelligence Committee was urged yesterday to fashion legislation that would curtail the CIA's censorship powers over its former employees.

The request came from the freedom of information committee of the Society of Professional Journalists (Sigma Delta Chi), which expressed alarm over the scope of the secrecy agreements that all Central Intelligence Agency personnel are required to sign.

The Supreme Court held in February that the government has broad powers to enforce such agreements against former employees and can censor their writings even when they do not involve the disclosure of classified information.

Testifying at a hearing on proposed charter legislation for the CIA and other U.S. intelligence agencies, Robert Lewis, chairman of the society's freedom of information committee, said the CIA has a legitimate interest in preventing former employees from disclosing, intentionally or otherwise, sensitive information that could damage this country's national security.

He added, however, that "we are disturbed by the reach of the contract" that the CIA uses, requiring pre-publication review of any information involving the agency that the government has not made public before.

In effect, Lewis protested, CIA "employees are forced to sign away their First Amendment rights of free speech and free press for the rest of their lives."

Voicing fears that this could block any effective criticism of the agency by CIA veterans, Lewis suggested that the Senate Committee consider a ban only on writings "that irreparably harm the national security." Another

approach, he suggested, would be to set a time limit—perhaps five years after leaving the CIA—during which former personnel would have to submit their manuscripts for clearance.

Other witnesses at the hearing—which drew only one committee member, Sen. Walter D. Huddleston (D-Ky.)—assailed provisions of the proposed charter that would give the CIA a sweeping exemption from the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and that would allow extensive surveillance of Americans both here and abroad.

Katherine A. Meyer, director of the Freedom of Information Clearinghouse, said the CIA "cannot point to a single instance where release of information under the FOIA has endangered our national security."

Speaking for the American Society of Newspaper Editors' freedom of information committee, Joseph R. L. Sterne, editor of the Baltimore Sun, said the CIA proposal would "pull down a curtain of secrecy that is simply unnecessary."

Sterne also urged the committee to add to the proposed charter a provision that would prohibit the CIA "from recruiting, or seeking to recruit, journalists employed by American news organizations."

The bill, introduced by Huddleston, would prevent CIA agents from posing as journalists, but would not prevent the agency from paying journalists to work for the CIA.

Reed Irvine, chairman of Accuracy in Media Inc., which describes itself as "the citizens' media watchdog organization," said that curbing the use of journalists by U.S. intelligence agencies would be unwise, especially since there is nothing to prohibit their enlistment by the Soviet KGB or other foreign intelligence services.

"It is safe to say that any of the world's great intelligence agencies have made and continue to make good use of journalistic sources and journalists in their operations," Irvine said.